The Worm Bins

Like Dune, except the worms ride you.

Zero Philosophy
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§00 — It was as if the illumination had been designed to emphasize darkness. Beyond the pools of soft lamp-light, a carnival of shadow stretched to the edge of night, and was lost there. An almost perfect silence was scattered among the fragments of visibility. Islands of expectation resonated, hushed.

The society was not large. It was, in its own way, or some other, peculiarly select. Now it lent in upon itself, intent.

The master of ceremonies rose up from his seat into the largest patch of light. He raised his glass, making his toast "To the worms!"

Among the uninitiated, the words would surely have sounded merely odd, rather than chillingly ambiguous.

This is how it has to have been.

§01 — Matthew Rigby's mysterious disappearance had been reported by his brother, Alfred. They were apparently close, but 'metaphysically estranged' in Alfred Rigby's words. Initially, the phrase meant nothing to me. It was not until many hours later that I recollected it with any proper consideration of its seriousness.

I spent three whole hours with Alfred Rigby that afternoon. I learnt more about him than about his brother, despite my best efforts, and his almost unreserved cooperation. This might already have told me something, but of that, more later.

It very quickly emerged that Alfred Rigby was a man of deep – if eccentric – Christian conviction. The 'loss' of his brother was pitched overwhelmingly in spiritual terms. "I fear Matthew has now fallen beyond rescue," he said. "Yet even if only his body can be recovered, his damnation might still be incomplete."

Attributing these words to groundless morbid speculation, I paid little attention to them. "We will of course do what we can to find him," I answered, inadequately. "But for that we need to understand his most recent activities."

“Ha,” Alfred exclaimed, in a tone of astonishing horror and bitterness. “Yes, indeed.”

When I directly asked him whether his brother shared his own particular religious persuasion, he became distinctly hesitant, for the first time in our conversation.

There had been “some divergence” he admitted, after a long pause. “In truth,” he continued, quietly, “the exact nature of Matthew’s beliefs had become difficult to ascertain with clarity.”

“But you would describe him as a religious man?”

“Oh yes! Yes indeed, even to a fault.”

I found this turn of phrase difficult to interpret, but refrained from direct comment.

“Resurrection in the flesh, you understand,” he continued. “The sublime mystery at the heart of our faith – it gnawed upon him. He considered it essentially unthought.”

“Isn’t that what a mystery means?”

“That depends, in turn, on what thought means.”

I had never been further out of my depth. Even my weak grasp on what had already been said was slipping. What would count as a relevant question? I had come to the end of what I could then learn.

§02 — The bare facts of the matter are more easily enumerated. Matthew Rigby was unmarried, and without close family beside his brother. His small townhouse had recently been sold, and all his property apparently disposed of. To all appearance, he had neatly arranged his own vanishing. No written testament to his plans had been found. There would have been no case at all had his brother not insisted on there being one.

§03 — Immediately upon my return to the station, I was intercepted by Detective Inspector Jonathan Clarke. He was not attached to our department, but by chance, I knew something of the man and his back-story. It was told to me before I had any reason to take any interest in him.

He had been an ethnographer of some distinction, with a special interest in comparative religion. Increasingly, his focus of interest had shifted to the representation of exotic religious ideas within European, and particularly English, occult societies. His expertise in this field was probably peerless, when disaster struck.

In the Year of our Lord 1890, Clarke’s family had been gathered for their traditional Christmas dinner at their country seat in Kent. Clarke was there himself, but less than an hour before the

evening meal he was called away, by a visitor. My narrator betrayed some uncertainty at this point, whether despite or because of its axial significance. Where did Clarke go, and with whom? No reliable answer was forthcoming. Confidence resumes with his return, to a scene of crimson atrocity. He lost a grandfather, both parents, and both siblings – a brother and sister – to the crime.

He insisted that the killings were not only obviously ritualistic, but that they were furthermore identifiably attributable to a particular strand of Polynesian mystery cultism, and one with which he had definite and invaluable intellectual familiarity. Some easily-pursued micro-sociology directed to understanding the recent spread of this cult within the English Home Counties would inevitably lead to the apprehension of the perpetrators and a complete resolution of the case, he predicted. Yet it seemed to him that his advice was entirely ignored. One especially infuriating report, leaked to him anonymously, described the ceremonial features of the killings as "most probably a prank" designed to "spoof" the family heritage of advanced anthropological study, passed down through three generations.

Frustrated by the police handling of the investigation, Clarke had skewed his life wildly in the direction of law enforcement. A natural talent for detective work was reinforced by diligence that edged continuously into fanaticism. Yet, in truth, Clarke was a difficult man to like. Ordinary human sentiment seemed entirely alien to him. Furthermore, he made no apparent effort to smooth the impression he made. Those who accused him of arrogant pedantry had a point. Quite clearly, the professional respect he earned from his colleagues was entirely unaccompanied by affection. His career progress was drastically retarded by such failings.

"They sent you to interview the brother?" Clarke asked now, though he had to already know.

"That's right."

"Christ," he muttered, mostly to himself. "I'm assuming you didn't learn anything."

I didn't want to admit his prejudice might be justified, though in fact I shared it. "It appears there's a religious angle," I mumbled.

He sighed deeply.

"And a club of some kind," I continued.

"Yes, yes," he replied, with obvious impatience. "It's this place." He flashed a business card past me, too quickly to read. "You better come along, I suppose, since they've decided to involve you."

It didn't seem to me that the decision could possibly be his to make, but I nodded anyway. Something about the case had begun to grimly fascinate me.

"They've put Joyce in charge," Clarke said, sighing again. "We'll share a ride with him."

§04 — It turned out that Detective Superintendant Harold Joyce had made his own way to the address. Nevertheless, a police motor carriage had been arranged for us, with a driver who now greeted us politely.

We climbed into the vehicle.

"I didn't find Alfred Rigby easy to understand," I confessed. "It was as if he spoke in code, without realizing it. The impression he gave was that his brother was a man in the grip of unusual ideas."

"Did it cross your mind to ask about the nature of these 'unusual ideas'?"

"I was already lost," I admitted, sliding still further into abject confession. "It required an expert."

"Indeed," he remarked.

"Why weren't you chosen?" I asked, unnecessarily. It had to be his own unspoken question.

"They had no idea what they were dealing with." It was said neutrally, without any hint of bitterness. "In any case, I would have been unlikely to learn much. The brother – Alfred – isn't an insider."

"An 'insider' of what?" I nagged, all pride long gone.

"You've heard of the Ouroboros Society?"

Perhaps he really thought I might have done. It was hard to tell. The idea was nevertheless absurd. The depths of my incomprehension must have been easy to read, since he immediately abandoned all expectation of an answer. Instead of awaiting one, he took out the card he had previously shown me, but this time allowing me to study it. The words *Ouroboros Society* were neatly printed on it, in a heavy font with subtle Gothic characteristics, followed by an address, 111 Okwardgate Square.

The words over-lay a soft-gray image, like a shredding ring. I had only glimpsed it uncertainly before, but now it revealed itself as a self-devouring serpent.

“Where did you get this?” I blurted out. It struck me as inherently if opaquely incriminating.

Clarke contemptuously ignored the question. “If you don’t understand this, nothing will make any sense,” he said. “So prepare yourself for abysmal confusion.”

“How do I begin to understand it?”

“Look at the image. Do you think beginnings are going to be any part of this?”

“Then, if everything is circular, I’ll never grasp it.”

“Unless it has already been grasped,” he said. The neutral pronoun was chilling beyond all reasonable proportion. It twisted me into myself, and silenced me. Clarke, too, had said enough for the moment. He smiled enigmatically, as if to approve my accelerated education. I did not smile. Rather, I found myself, even then, attempting to arrest the wheels of thought, before they could carry me to a destination anticipated with unlimited abhorrence.

§05 — I regained my capacity for speech as we arrived at Okwardgate Square, and dismounted from the vehicle.

“Odd name,” I noted.

“It was Okward’s Gate,” Clarke explained. “Basil Okward owned a mansion here, but it was destroyed in the Great Fire.”

“Should I have heard of him?”

“He founded, or – as he said – ‘reestablished’ the Ouroboros Society.”

“In the Seventeenth Century?” Such antiquity struck me as improbable.

“It’s thoroughly documented.”

“Isn’t that unusual for a secret society?”

“Who said anything about a ‘secret society’? It was established in full public view. Still, the mistake is understandable,” he said, surprising me with the concession. “Within the scientific shell there was an esoteric nucleus, inclined towards ideas that men could certainly have been burned for. The documentation becomes increasingly *cautious* as one advances inwards. Institutional continuity is well-attested, doctrinal continuity far less so.”

It took me some few seconds to construe his basic implication. “Yet despite the uncertainty of its origins, the current doctrine of the ‘inner’ Ouroboros Society is something you understand?”

“Broadly, yes.”

“And you find it germane to this investigation?”

“Eminently so,” he confirmed.

§06 — The square appeared too small for 111 addresses, or even for a third of that number. Its atmosphere was forlorn.

A small inhospitable park occupied its center. Fierce iron railings deterred ingress.

“Is that a tomb?” I wondered aloud.

Clarke nodded. “Okward’s,” he said. “Now, if you can guess what it’s called among the initiated, I’ll be impressed.”

“I can’t even guess who ‘the initiated’ are.”

“Those who know it as *the empty tomb*,” he said, to avoid being side-tracked. “You might be finding the reverberations intriguing.”

He was right, but not in any way that indicated convergence upon insight. Rather, my thoughts were being scattered through ever more hectic gyrations.

“There’s no body?”

“We don’t know,” he admitted, “but there has certainly been an *idea* that there is not.”

“That Okward mysteriously disappeared?”

“Now you’re beginning to get it.”

“But no more than beginning,” I confirmed, with what I hoped was a suitably humble smile. “In our line of work, missing people are more of a question than an answer, aren’t they? All I can see is more puzzles heaping up.”

“‘Missing people’ is a category that needs decomposing.”

“You mean it requires further specification?”

“That too,” he answered. “This is the place.”

§07 — The building numbered 111 looked as if it should have had a name as well, or instead, to match a nearly unendurable weight of history. It had not aged gracefully, but seemed to my eyes almost a materialization of accumulated bitterness. An edifice built for bad memories would appear the same. It was tucked into an urban nook, largely sheltering it from casual observation. Up close, its grandeur was striking. Yet it also somehow withdrew itself from direct observation, as if it was the mere shadow of a structure belonging to another dimension. Examining it required craning the neck for perspectival engagement with angles that were first dizzying and finally uninterpretable. More than this, the building hid shadows within its shadows, until its shape was quite lost. What appeared initially as a mere excess of Gothic Revival detailing quickly scuttled from perception into obscure crannies and tricks of light.

From end to end, Okwardgate Square was consistently gloomy, as if the date was advanced several months further into late autumn there. Yet none of its other addresses approached the dread majesty of Number 111. Those closest to it seemed almost to wilt from toxic contact, sagging into lopsided dilapidation.

Clarke, who evidently recognized the building, did not pretend to take pleasure in contemplating it. Yet the firmness of his scowl spoke also of grim determination. Some unfinished business doubtless contributed to it.

The Superintendant was waiting for us outside. I could not guess how long he had been waiting there.

“Ah,” he said now, recognizing us both. “Gentlemen, let us proceed. Duty calls.”

He was at this point quite cheerful about our mission. The routine exercise of implicitly acknowledged authority pleased him, reliably though not immoderately. Such satisfaction was unsullied, since there was nothing yet impelling him to find anything about the case peculiarly macabre.

Joyce tended to bluster, which meant he could be mistaken for a fool. I myself had often underestimated him. Yet his brusque manner masked a genuine talent for delegation, through which he optimized his own abilities, and these were considerable. In particular, his imaginative empathy with the criminal mind, while completely devoid of moral sympathy, verged upon sinister genius. The most perverse motives were generally transparent to him. His success rate was remarkable, and appreciated by his seniors. On this occasion, however, he would be lost.

§08 — The portico of 111 Okwardgate Square was an intimidating black maw. Joyce, I could see, shared my reluctance to enter it. After some few moments, however, regard for the dignity of his office propelled him to the door.

A formally-liveried servant of advanced years opened it. There was something intangibly repellant about him. It was as if his features had been subtly suffused with having seen too much. I took an involuntary step backwards.

“Are you expected sirs?”

Instead of verbal affirmation, Joyce exhibited his police credentials. “This is the home of the Ouroboros Society?” he asked, mispronouncing it. The question was merely formal, or rhetorical, and was received as such. Perhaps it induced some slight inclination of the doorman’s head, but if so the gesture was unnecessary.

“We’re concerned about one of its members – a Mister Matthew Rigby,” Joyce continued.

“I’m afraid, Officer, that Mister Rigby isn’t here. Nor are any members of the society, at this moment.”

“We didn’t expect him to be.”

The doorman responded to Joyce’s gruffness with a sly smile. “Perhaps you’d like to come in,” he said.

Joyce stepped forward and inwards, all hesitation masked. We followed him. The threshold had been crossed.

§09 — It had not occurred to me that we could possibly have any other business at the address than interviewing Rigby’s fellows in the society. Upon gathering that no such interviews would be taking place, I then assumed we would simply leave. None of these assumptions had been much thought through. Still less were they informed. Only later would I understand that Clarke had his own, very definite investigative objectives, which he had shared to some negligible extent with Joyce, but no further. As I followed my colleagues into the building, whatever I had previously held onto as a sense of purpose disintegrated completely. Directionless compliance replaced it. The price I paid in dignity for this was fully compensated by irresponsibility. Never before had I felt such relief from the suspension of agency. What now happened would not be of my doing. This I seized upon almost as a salvation, such was the morally ominous quality of the world we then entered.

Understanding nothing about our objectives liberated the faculty of sensation. My perceptions were abstracted and refined, or at least aestheticized. What I saw around me was seen as a complex artwork should be, absorbed without presupposition, as attention diffused passively across its features and details. Prejudice was melted as if by a torch. With each passing moment I knew less about what might be learnt here. An undertow of unprecedented dread carried me forward into its lesson.

§10 — From both sides of the entrance hall, twin staircases curved upwards to the second floor. Bizarrely elaborate black ironwork dominated the scene. The effect was draconic, though I could not quite work out why. It suggested a huge coiling mass, erupting from extra-cosmic obscurities, into which we were invited to proceed.

“To the left, I think,” Clarke advised, in a voice lowered deferentially. “The Event Hall is there.”

With a grunt of sub-verbal appreciation, Joyce led us in the direction, up to the next level. The demented intricacy of the staircase railings became ever more startling as we approached and were guided by them. Iron tangles rose in waves, as if mounting towards some unspeakable crisis.

“The fellow who designed the banisters claimed to be a sixth-generation direct descendant of Okward,” Clarke noted. “It probably won’t surprise you to learn that he died howling in Bedlam.”

“You seem to know a lot about the place,” Joyce grumbled. “Unless you’re careful, you’ll be confused for a cultist.”

“Someone has to keep an eye on them.”

“Yes, yes,” Joyce accepted, as if with enormous reluctance. “I suppose that’s true. So long as the game-keepers don’t find themselves turning into poachers, you know.”

The sentence echoed, its tense uncertain.

§11 — Within the main hall the opulence of impression defied comprehension. Even the wallpaper seethed with complexity. The pattern suggested massive repetition, but then dissolved into endless variation upon close inspection. I struggled to imagine a manufacturing process that might produce it. No part of the design ever quite happened twice. The wonderment that possessed me upon making this discovery is hard to convey. Momentarily, I even doubted its consistency with woken consciousness.

“You’ll find no clues there,” Clarke said, breaking my fugue.

If he had grounds for this assumption, they escaped me. Some stubborn impulse pushed me to intensify rather than withdraw my scrutiny. How could something so extraordinary lack relevance? Yet the phenomenon – while continuously astonishing – was unyielding in its meaninglessness. There were no depths to penetrate, or signs to catalog. Flat mystery prolonged itself across the walls.

After some few further stubborn moments I disentangled my gaze from it. “You’re right,” I admitted, grudgingly. “There’s nothing to latch onto. It’s strictly incomprehensible.”

“There are plenty of other things to examine here that can tell you more.”

It was said neutrally enough, and was even as close as Clarke ever came to amiability. Still, the words chilled me. I came close to returning to the wallpaper, as to a refuge.

§12 — A large painting, dense with shadow in the Dutch style, depicted a figure in Seventeenth Century period costume. It had to be Okward, I guessed.

“Yes, that’s him,” Clarke said, without needing to be asked. “It’s not a contemporary rendition, though, so it’s not to be trusted.”

“You mean it’s a copy?”

“Yes, and of an unreliable original, scarcely more than a cartoon, in fact, and now lost.”

The painting was merely the occasion for such commentary, I understood. Clarke was portraying the Society far more generally.

§13 — Joyce spent not much less than an hour conducting his own, personally-directed investigation of the premises. It was a matter of pride to him, perhaps, that he be not entirely beholden to Clarke for guidance, or at least that he be seen making an effort not to be.

Dignity preserved, he turned to Clarke at last. “What am I seeing here?” he asked. The scene evidently offended him, in a way he was incapable of resolving to his own satisfaction. There was something – many things – very badly *off* about it.

The question had been so badly posed that Clarke struggled to respond. Joyce was not seeing anything that mattered. Far from seeing, he was not even looking. He should have asked *what there was to see*, but even had he done so useful answers would have remained inaccessible. Anything that could be seized upon was at once wildly excessive and wholly inadequate.

“It takes time,” Clarke said, after some moments, pressured to say something, however inane. “There’s a lot to absorb.”

“I have to wonder at the relevance of it all,” Joyce grumbled, with entirely unintended ambiguity. “How much madness do we delve through in search of one missing man?”

§14 — Like Joyce, but under my own direction, I sought to perceive the room through Clarke’s eyes. These were the strange seas in which he swam. It would all be – at some level – familiar to him. The jagged edges of exoticism would cut nowhere nearly as deep.

I was quickly dazed and exhausted by its extreme incongruities. Over-taxed senses slid into alienated reverie. The theme of its furnishings combined a reckless indulgence in superstition with the most austere naturalistic rigor. There was nothing anywhere that repelled the scientific spirit, but also nothing that refrained from stretching, twisting, and contorting it. The wildest mythological delirium was, if not quite *reduced*, at least subtly dissolved into turbulence. Upon examination, the most extravagant decorative archaism became perfectly contemporary, or even futuristic, as it complied in detail with exact investigative method. An observer, groping for perceptual equilibrium, might seize upon the obscure notion of *alchemy*.

Shelves were cluttered with clockwork and what might have been laboratory equipment. A number of large diagrams were displayed on the walls. These amalgamated instructive condensations of scientific topics – drawing especially upon geological and biological studies – combined with more abstract mathematical patterns, whose outer wisps diffused into embellishments of arcane symbolism. Each was dizzying. The psychological shock of information glut was accentuated by the peculiarly spiral mode of presentation. It was as if, always, a continuous folded line linked the most heterogeneous of materials, without prospect of termination. As perception followed perception, the mind wound in intensifying gyres, on some foaming descent into a whirlpool of association. I could not think where to look. Everywhere, it seemed, eddies of implication snatched at me.

“Do you get the idea?” Clarke asked. He was addressing me, but no doubt wanted Joyce also to hear.

“There’s an idea?” I replied, unconvinced. It seemed no more likely than the discovery of logical formulae in opium reveries. “Why is everything swirling?”

“Does nature swirl?”

“Assuredly,” I answered.

“And would you expect swirls to be mathematically tractable?”

“Rather the opposite.”

“Thus, in combination, you have your answer. The Society seeks *to stress intelligence realistically*.”

“By turning always in the direction of that we find most difficult to model?”

“Things that turn upon or into themselves, reflexive things, self-swallowing vortices, loops – I’m sure you’re beginning to follow the pattern.”

It was all as the image on the card had summarized. Looking around now, a profound sense of winding consistency impressed itself upon me, like curling smoke.

“The ‘cult’ is just this?”

“Just this *taken to its limit*,” he readily agreed. “Never holding back in word or deed,” he added, as if quoting something – a motto perhaps. He leant forward, better to examine a diagram simplifying the dominant chemical cycles in temperate forests. “It can be a terrible thing to contemplate, but madness is only sincerity.”

§15 — One wall was dominated by heavy glass tanks, of a greenish hue. Upon noticing them, I knew at once that they were what mattered most here. Despite recognizing their importance, I approached them only with the greatest reluctance. The heaving masses within confirmed my fears.

“Worm bins,” Clarke commented, as he joined me beside them. “Extraordinary, aren’t they?”

“Extraordinary, yes,” I agreed, without hesitation. “Thank heavens.”

“There’s no room for distaste in rigorous police work,” he scolded. “It clouds observation.” He leant forward to better examine the content of the tanks. “We’ll probably need a laboratory to sift through these.”

Looking for what? I might have said, but there was no need to.

It had been, for several days, a case of disappearance. Now it acquired a far more sinister aspect.

§16 — A long table occupied one side of the hall. A total of twenty-four chairs were set around it. At one end, both floor and table were raised by a few inches. The five chairs here were notably larger and more ornate than the others, the one at the head of the table especially so. Behind this grand seat a painting of the worm bins hung.

“*The Brotherhood of Urban Composters*,” Joyce read aloud. “It sounds innocent enough, I suppose,” he mumbled, without conviction. “There has to be a niche for such people.”

Clarke's attention remained glued to the bins themselves.

"They can eat bones," he explained. I said nothing. My skepticism must have been obvious.

"You don't believe me?" he asked. "I understand how it might seem improbable."

Instead of replying I forced myself back to the tank. Its worms were obviously unusual. Yellow stripes off-set a coloration that was predominantly deep red – almost scarlet.

"Blood worms," Clarke continued. "They're not a native species. Sumatran originally, though now invasive in Florida, it is reported. These were most likely imported from America."

"You're saying they killed Rigby and then fed him to the worms?"

"Killed him? I don't know."

"But the other thing?" I insisted, despite myself.

"That seems to be beyond any question. Look at these residues." He pointed at what I could only identify as meaningless stains.

"They would scarcely dispose of the body unless they had something to hide," I remarked.

"If that's what they were doing."

"But you said …"

Clarke interrupted impatiently. "I accepted your suggestion that the corpse of Matthew Rigby had been *fed to the worms*. No definite motive was proposed."

It was somehow obvious from his tone that he meant more than he had yet said.

§17 — Clarke shifted mode, to something almost pedagogic.

"You have heard of sky-burial?" he asked.

Neither Joyce nor I could have betrayed the slightest hint of comprehension. Without attempting to edit the irritation from his voice, Clarke offered a brief explanation.

"You're saying *they deliberately feed the bodies of their dead to animals?*" Joyce interrupted. He clearly hoped that he had misunderstood.

"To vultures, yes," Clarke replied, his impatience sharpening.

“My God!” exclaimed Joyce, his voice thickened with revulsion.

“There’s no soil, or wood to burn. Burial and cremation are equally infeasible.”

“But still – my God!” Joyce looked vaguely ill. Then his thoughts connected, and he looked worse. “You’re not saying …”

“It’s the most probable hypothesis.”

“*Food for worms*,” Joyce muttered, as if citing funeral liturgy, and then once again, though more hushed, and at a yet-greater pitch of distress: “My God!”

“Transmutation of the flesh,” Clarke noted. “It’s an old idea. You will, of course, be familiar with it from our own religious traditions. Certain tendencies in esoteric alchemy were especially oriented towards it.”

§18 — I found it easy to empathize with Joyce’s outburst of spiritual horror, despite its incontinence. My higher faculties, too, rose in revolt against the thesis being advanced.

“It makes no sense,” I protested. “What imaginable advantage could be expected from this?”

“We’ll get to that,” Clarke said, “in time.”

“Or at least not outside it,” I muttered, before being checked by better judgment.

As no stranger to such petty displays of animosity, he ignored the comment, except for a thin private smile.

§19 — *De Vermis Mysteriis* can seem unnecessarily morbid on a first reading. It is easy to miss the subtle humor. How could it be imagined that *feeding oneself to worms* might be an attractive idea? But eventually, sense dawns. By the time you grasp the inevitability, its work is done.

§20 — For some few seconds my curiosity overcame even abysmal aversion.

“So how *did* he die?” I asked. If far from the most lurid question arising from the case, this was surely still the most important object of police investigation.

Abominations could be of no official concern to us if they were not also crimes.

“It might turn out there is nothing wrong,” Clarke quietly suggested.

“*Nothing wrong*,” Joyce exploded. He had finally crossed the line, passing beyond his outer limit of psychological endurance. “This is England, damn it! We don’t feed our dead to loathsome

vermin and then make a religion out of it."

"It seems we do, at least occasionally."

Clarke's calm was not deliberately provocative, but it might as well have been. It incorporated a refusal of moral communion that trampled down all social inhibition.

I wondered whether physical violence was in prospect.

"Was Rigby already dying?" I asked.

"Oh, I see no reason to indulge that hypothesis," Clarke answered, with entirely inappropriate steadiness.

"Then he was killed?"

"Murdered," Joyce added, in correction.

"Unless, most probably, he sacrificed himself," Clarke suggested, with unmistakable firmness of conviction.

"How could that possibly have been motivated?" I asked once again. "It could not have been thought an elevation."

"My God!" repeated Joyce once more, revolted by my question, and meaning no such thing. His psychological state was visibly fraying.

Clarke sought to answer me, as directly as he could. "You know the expression 'opening a can of worms'?" he asked. "It's only partially like that. You see, the worm *is* the can, which is to say, the envelope."

"The Great Envelope," I said, recalling a cryptic inscription near the worm bins.

"Yes, exactly – Ouroboros," he confirmed, "the all-enveloping worm."

Joyce wanted the conversation to end, it was clear. He could accept no justification for it. Police procedure did not require such reflections. Evil was being indulged.

Yet he made no effort to silence us. To assert control, even in this way, would have been to take the case more fully into his own hands, and – by this point – that was the very last thing he wanted to do. It was extraordinary to see him thus changed. I wondered what he might do.

§21 — Steered still by the objective of directness, Clarke changed tack again.

“When do you think this is happening?” he asked.

The question was too arcane for positive reception. Blank looks closed upon him, tinged with varying degrees of hostility.

“Oh come,” he continued, unflustered. “Has no one even begun to consider context?”

Without quite understanding his insinuation, a shiver passed through me. It would be better not to hear, I knew. ‘Context’ and ‘envelope’ slimed into each other.

Yet Clarke had not finished. “That was when I began to suspect a worm dream,” he said, as if musing to himself.

Please let this mean a dream about worms, I begged silently, while suspecting something else entirely. The hope died upon conception. Already, his thoughts trod the other track.

“Did you ever study the transcendental philosophy?” he asked me. “I mean study it enough, at least, to intuit *the worm behind the world*?”

Joyce, I knew, was simply refusing to hear the words. He looked around the room as Clarke spoke, absented from what was being said. Perhaps I had never envied anything as much as this capability.

“If you are determined to speak of something *other* than a dream with worms as its object,” I said to Clarke, “then I would very much appreciate some opportunity for psychological preparation.”

He smiled coldly at this, though perhaps as warmly as he ever did. “Evidently you are ahead of me,” he said. “Perhaps nothing further needs adding.”

“Perhaps not,” I echoed him, desperate that it be so.

“Although, you asked earlier why anyone would do this,” he said. “And that remains unanswered so far.”

“Unanswered, also, for you?”

“Not so much,” he admitted. “As you understand, a long path led me here. Things that seemed improbable at best, on the way, now appear closer to certainties.”

Hideous wisdom glittered in his eyes.

§22 — 'Madness' is a word that is easy to use casually. It has associations that are widely – if hazily – grasped, and lends itself to hyperbolic employment. Such flippancy assures that when madness is in truth approached its mere glimpse carries a charge of shattering revelation.

What uncloaked itself as madness before me now, introduced by Clarke's words, was an absolute confidence that *I should soon know*. Something of a nature I could not yet even suspect was unquestionably arriving, it seemed, overwhelmingly. It was, then, a gnosis of the void that crashed over me. '*That* without *what*' it might be said. It was less than a clue, and yet no less than perfect evidence.

§23 — A specter of salvation came.

"Enough," Joyce said. "And, in the Lord's sweet name, far more than enough," he added. "Detective Inspector Clarke, based upon the discretion invested in me by Her Majesty's Government, you are immediately relieved of all further responsibilities in this case. Consider yourself recused."

Clarke did not look surprised, or even much irritated. "Recusal does not usually apply to police work," he said. "It certainly shouldn't here."

"On that, as on so much else, we disagree. Your complicity could not easily be more evident. Whatever the monstrosities being promoted here, you have sought to the fullest extent of your powers to promote them further. No, don't argue," as if Clarke had been attempting to. "This can all be discussed, under more suitable circumstances, and between more specifically credentialed experts, at a later date."

The development should have come to me as an inestimable relief. Had not my passage into the maelstrom of madness, apparently inescapable only moments before, been now definitively arrested? An alternative version of me, overcome by hysterical gratitude, laughed unstoppably, oblivious to the humiliation of it. This one, though, did not. It was all too good to be true, and it was not relief that came.

As Joyce and Clarke spoke, their voices receded. Vision swam. Some occult current was drawing me away from them. As I sank backwards, perspective exploded.

"No," I said, without purpose. "I don't want this. It's not for me to know."

Now both figures – weirdly shrunken as if by great distance while also unchanged in size – turned towards me. Joyce looked appalled, Clarke merely interested. Still today, I have no sense for what they could have seen.

“For God’s sake come back man,” Joyce demanded. “You don’t have to listen to any more of this.”

His voice was faint, and not compelling. Though perfectly audible, it was somehow recessed, like a sound-track recorded for some kind of moving picture.

My situation was undergoing an immobile transformation. Already, I was looking *in* upon them or, rather, the scene was *being looked in upon*, by something other than and instead of me. That was the fundamental structure of the phenomenon. A perspective was revealed by it. The tangible implication was engulfing. What remained of me struggled, in futile, frozen desperation, to avoid the connection between what now manifested and Clarke’s words. There was nothing I sought less than the meaning of *worm dream*. Yet still, uncaring, it came.

§24 — Perhaps, accursed creature, you already see. The awoken nightmare is certainly not mine alone.

§25 — Within hours of our departure from the scene, the case was shelved. It could not then, or ever, be officially closed. There was nothing more to be learnt about it, and still less to be said. It was consigned to a legal and historical Limbo realm whose existence I had not previously suspected.

I visited Alfred Rigby again, this time in a private capacity.

“Do you know?” I asked him.

I could see that he was tempted to lie. The words he would have employed, in constructing this deceit, would be those he himself wanted to hear, and to believe. He toyed, I could tell, with the pretense that things are not as they are. Who could not want that? Yet he was not among those to be so blessed by delusion.

He met my question with his own. “You’ve seen the worm bins?” he asked.

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